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Narrative and Media: Helen Fulton with Rosemary Huisman, Julian Murphet and Anne Dunn, Melbourne, 2005.

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Abstract

Book review

Narrative and Media Helen Fulton, with Rosemary Huisman, Julian Murphet, and Anne Dunn, Melbourne, 2005.

The book *Narrative and Media* should be of great interest to students and scholars of Media Studies alike. Coming from a post-structuralist perspective, the book interrogates the ideological implications of narrative strategies across the major forms of the media, and offers a clear and cogent explanation of how readers are positioned as consumers of the media. With the commodification of the media becoming more and more prevalent, media scholars need to develop a reliable set of theoretical tools rigorous enough to unpack how it is that the media is able to maintain its 'objective' facade, and this book goes a long way to demonstrating how this is achieved.

Keywords

melbourne, narrative, media, 2005, helen, fulton, rosemary, huisman, julian, murphet, anne, dunn

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Book review

Narrative and Media

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The book *Narrative and Media* should be of great interest to students and scholars of Media Studies alike. Coming from a post-structuralist perspective, the book interrogates the ideological implications of narrative strategies across the major forms of the media, and offers a clear and cogent explanation of how readers are positioned as consumers of the media. With the commodification of the media becoming more and more prevalent, media scholars need to develop a reliable set of theoretical tools rigorous enough to unpack how it is that the media is able to maintain its 'objective' façade, and this book goes a long way to demonstrating how this is achieved.

Divided into five sections, the book examines the ways in which contemporary media structure narrative (in film, television, radio, print journalism, magazines, and advertising) to negotiate meaning—including a consideration of narrative strategies and their ideological implications. Part One, written by Rosemary Huisman, sets out the theoretical underpinnings of the book, mapping out the concepts of narrative that will be taken up in the subsequent chapters as they deal in turn with each form of media. Huisman introduces such concepts as focalisation and temporality in narrative, focusing in particular on the notion of duration (after Genette, 1980). From the Greek philosophical tradition come the terms 'diegesis' and 'mimesis' (telling and showing), as two ways of presenting a narrative. And, from the

realm of semiotics, Pierce's triadic understanding of the sign and Saussure's dyadic understanding of the sign are briefly elaborated on. Chapter Three continues this theoretical introduction by giving a brief historical recount of narrative theory in terms of structuralist and post-structuralist approaches, the latter of which this volume aligns itself with more closely.

In Part Two, Julian Murphet examines film as a major producer of narrative and the ways in which films are able to produce different kinds of meaning to address audiences in specific ways through the construction and manipulation of narrative elements such as plot, time, character, voice, and point of view. He takes the concepts introduced by Huisman in the previous chapters and demonstrates how they can be applied to analyses of classic films such as Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* and Hitchcock's *Rebecca*. Helen Fulton concludes this section with a semiotic analysis of how a novel becomes a film, examining in particular two very well known transformations, *The English Patient* (1996) and *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001). Here, the tools outlined by Julian Murphet are applied to these films in order to explore how they create meanings that may differ from those of the original novel.

The focus shifts in Part Three to the narratives and ideology of television. The genres of television are introduced by Anne Dunn with reference to how narrative structure is established through the notions of space and time. Rosemary Huisman then looks quite specifically at narrative deployment in series, serials, soap operas, and sitcoms. In Part Four, radio and print journalism are discussed with particular reference to the telling of the news, and Part Five examines the narrative tendencies of magazines and advertising.

In the chapters dealing with the narrative tendencies of television news, radio news, and print news stories, the authors draw on Bell's (1991) interpretation of the hard news story structure known as the inverted pyramid, and the assertion that this is a structure assumed to be a characteristic of 'objective' news reporting (p. 228). In each case, the inverted pyramid structure is said to be a means of ranking information in the story in order of importance (pp. 143, 206, 228, & 229), with information in the 'lead' angling the story on the most important aspect of the event. However, stating so overtly that information in the story is ranked in order of significance immediately suggests a subjective act on the part of the journalist in selecting the order in which information is to be presented. An alternative way of describing the hard news story

structure that, I believe, elides this notion of ranking information and consequently places itself more confidently in the realm of objective news reporting, is that of the orbital news story structure presented by Rick Iedema, Susan Feez, and Peter White in their 1994 monograph *Media Literacy*. Here the lead is also angled on the most destabilising aspect of the event; however, the subsequent paragraphs relate back to the lead by means of expansion, that is, whether they elaborate, extend, or enhance information presented in the lead (White, 1998). The orbital model also allows for the possibility of the news story reaching some kind of closure, which even hard news stories do attempt to do, often through the use of quotation from experts or key players in a particular news event (Iedema, Feez, & White, 1994). The importance of scaling implied by the inverted pyramid structure does not easily model this possibility.

A more subtle distinction between texts that chronicle events, that is, 'hard' news stories and 'soft' news stories, is not specifically addressed in this volume. The category 'soft news story' can be further divided into media exemplum (stories that also indicate their moral relevance), media anecdote (sharing experiences), and media observation (stories that record the passing of time) (after Martin & Plum, 1997). This trichotomy could provide more robust grounds for generic distinctions between hard and soft news reporting and the standards of objectivity that they achieve.

This notion of objectivity in news reporting is one that attracts continuous debate and Helen Fulton puts forward a very cogent argument on this issue in Chapter 16. In the following chapter, Fulton uses Halliday's metafunctional approach to text analysis to examine how public idiom is constructed in news journalism. In so doing, she demonstrates most convincingly how such a systematic analysis of a text in any medium can lead to both illuminating and definitive results.

Aimed at both undergraduate and postgraduate media students, this book covers all the traditional forms of the media. The chapters are relatively short and in easily digestible units. Although they do build upon the theory presented in earlier chapters, it is quite easy to skip around the book, picking up on areas of immediate interest before moving onto other areas of interest.

In her introduction to this book, Helen Fulton picks up on the unhappy relationship between semiotics and cultural studies and stakes a claim

for the systematic linguistic analysis of media text. She states that "[I]f cultural studies is not to disappear into a vacuum of superficial rhetoric and ambit claims about the hegemonic function of the media, it has to be buttressed by a theorised approach to language, signification and the production of ideology" (p. 2). By embracing the linguistic theory of Michael Halliday and demonstrating how it can be fruitfully applied to the analysis of media text, this book has taken a step in the direction of dispelling such notions of vacuity. It is an encouraging sign to see a renewal of such dialogue between cultural studies and linguistics, and as a result we should be able to look forward to more work in this tradition being published.

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